

Review: Peter Hupe (Ed.) (2019): Research Handbook on Street-Level Bureaucracy

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Peter Hupe (Ed.) (2019). *Research Handbook on Street-Level Bureaucracy. The Ground Floor of Government in Context*. Edward Elgar. ISBN: 978 1 78643 762 4, pp. 544 + xx.

Zusammenfassung

Das von Peter Hupe herausgegebene *Research Handbook on Street-Level Bureaucracy* zeichnet sich durch einen roten Faden und die Kohärenz der Beiträge aus. Es umfasst mit einer Sammlung von hochwertigen Essays, theoretischen und methodischen Beiträgen in fünf Teilen eine systematische Bestandsaufnahme und Bewertung der Forschung zu *street-level bureaucracy* sowie einen Ausblick auf aktuelle Forschungsfragen, -ansätze und -methoden. Als Meilenstein im Forschungsfeld wird das Handbuch nicht nur einen Mehrwert für die Forschung bieten, sondern auch zur Pflichtlektüre für zahlreiche Bachelor- und Masterkurse werden. Durch die einleitenden und abschließenden Essays sowie vier Beiträge mit Beteiligung des Herausgebers, die sich wie ein Choral durch das Werk ziehen, ist das Handbuch sehr stringent und fokussiert als Gesamtwerk auf die Entwicklung eines theoretischen Rahmens zur Einordnung und Generalisierung von Forschungsergebnissen. Im Zentrum steht dabei die Frage nach den Bestimmungsfaktoren der Aufgabenerfüllung auf Ebene der *street-level bureaucracy*, wobei sowohl *street-level bureaucracy* als Verwaltungsdienstleister als auch über die direkte Bürger*innen-Verwaltung-Interaktion hinausgehende Faktoren und Bedingungen betrachtet werden.

With handbooks seeming to proliferate in the past ten years or so, this one sticks out from the rest because of the strong purpose and editorial line sustained in it. It is in some senses conventional. It has elements of being a reader containing a set of interesting essays covering different aspects of a broad theme that would be useful for teaching as well as the researcher in the field. Yet it has a mission: to take the study of street-level bureaucracy (SLB) forward, addressing “the state of the art of street-level bureaucrat research by a systematic exploration of a range of theoretical and methodological issues” (Hupe, 2019, p. 9). It is the product of the editor’s “intensive period of working together” (Hupe, 2019, p. xx) with the contributors and this comes through very clearly in the strong coherence of the whole and the frequent cross-referencing between chapters.

The Handbook is structured in five parts: the work of the contributors covering theoretical issues (Part II), methodological issues (Part III) and new fields to be explored (Part IV); these are preceded by three essays from the editor, one co-written with Michael Hill (Part I), and two concluding essays (Part V). Much of the content of most contributions involves taking stock of the large and growing literature in the field, and each chapter generally contains an exceptionally valuable overview of the issue at

hand and a useful bibliography. It looks forward, however, to developing the study of SLB by chapters which raise foundational issues (covering what are we doing when we study SLB), exhort (highlighting things we should be doing more of) and offer technical advice (on methods for studying SLB). Many chapters do all three at the same time.

The editor's contributions, discussed further below, are not the only foundational contributions. Deborah Rice's "Adopting an institutional view" highlights a feature that crops up in Peter Hupe's introduction and conclusion as well as many of the chapters in between: that of understanding institutional/organization pressures on front-line officials and going beyond a focus on the individual bureaucrat and looking at the broader context and constraints within which they work; it is also a theme explored in other contributions including that of Anat Gofen, Shelly Sella and Drorit Gassner in the exploration of levels (micro, meso and macro) of analysis in street-level bureaucracy research, as well as Kim Loyens' "Networks as unit of analysis in street-level bureaucracy research". Liesbeth Van Parys discusses what it is that SLB research focuses on, "discretion as used", and usefully sets out the range of dependent variables involved in its study (degrees of discretion, decisions taken, styles of interaction with clients, coping with pressures and degrees of compliance and resistance). Changes in the nature of service production and delivery pose challenges for the study of SLB, and Tanja Klenk and Nissim Cohen explore "hybridization" in SLB; the apparently increasing tendency of service delivery involving interactions between multiple officials and their organizations spanning the public, private and non-profit sectors. Matilde Høybye-Mortensen looks at the way that digital office technologies affect SLB. Hupe and Lael R. Keiser seek to extend the study beyond the street level to look at front-line supervisors and their impact on service providers, linking the SLB literature to that of public management. Nissim Cohen and Tanja Klenk set out, in a second essay, the route by which SLBs participate in the policy process as "policy entrepreneurs", shaping the "design" of policy through, among other things, lobbying for changes in legislation. Bernard Zacka locates the study of SLB in the wider context of political theory and explores the evaluative standards one might hold SLBs to.

Those that exhort scholars of SLB to look into relatively neglected issues and areas include Gabriela Lotta and Roberto Pires who point to the need for more work on inequality, and the role of street-level bureaucracy as an arena for its generation, maintenance and reduction. Nadine Raaphorst and Sandra Groeneveld suggest that we look more closely at discrimination and representation in street-level bureaucracies, in particular examining how bureaucrats stereotype clients and the causes and consequences of this stereotyping. Marie Østergaard Møller suggests further attention should be devoted to the study of "national culture", and a stronger focus on cross-national comparison, including institutional as well as cultural variables, is advanced and outlined in a later chapter by Sabine Kuhlmann. That professional identities shape officials' exercise of discretion is suggested in Gitte Sommer Harrits' essay, which offers insights into the contribution that sociological literatures on professions can make. Vivienne Byers also explores what can be learned from disciplines other than public policy and administration such as the literature on management and the sociology of law and the professions and suggests "greater openness to looking across scholarly borders and being open to wider empirical findings" (Byers, 2019, p. 426). A sociological approach to the question of accountability, including a wider understanding of the different informal as well

as formal groups to which street-level bureaucrats respond, is suggested in a contribution from Eva Lieberherr and Eva Thomann. Helena Olofsdotter Stensöta argues for the benefits of using an ethics “lens” to understand and explain SLB behaviour.

While many of the chapters offer technical advice on how to conduct SLB research, some of the contributions put this objective to the forefront. Tony Evans, in a somewhat unusual contribution, looks at the opportunities for using drama to understand street-level practice. Nadine van Engen offers a chapter on quantitative street-level bureaucracy research, Anka Kekez a chapter on qualitative data analysis in implementation and street-level bureaucracy, and a chapter by Carina Schott and Daphne van Kleef sets out mixed-methods. Of particular interest to those seeking to do comparative work are Eva Thomann’s introduction to Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) and Gitte Sommer Harrits’ (second) contribution on how vignettes can be used in SLB research.

The essays are all of a high standard and collectively they cover all bases. This book will certainly have the desired impact of taking the field forward by putting in a single high-quality volume a wide range of issues, techniques, findings and problems in the study of SLB. Researchers already in the field and those new to it will find this book valuable and it is hard to think of a course on public policy and administration at under- or postgraduate level that could not assign chapters as essential reading.

There are certainly points to take issue with. Rather than single out parts of individual essays, let me mention a couple of general criticisms. The term “culture” crops up many times, and not only in the specific chapters addressing cross-national variations. I am no fan of the work of the late Geert Hofstede, but his extensive publications on the subject of (mainly national) cultures in organizations seem worth at least some discussion since they purport to cast light on broader cultural factors shaping individual behaviour of the kind that students of SLB seem to be very concerned with. There was also a very interesting and relevant line of theorising in the US in the early 1980s around “bureaucratic decision rules” – the work of Ken Mladenka was particularly impressive here – that rather petered out before it really got going and might be worth revisiting. This looked at the rules (e.g. “first come first served”) that sought to “standardize and simplify the demand-response relationship” (Mladenka, 1981, p. 695) and their consequences for the distribution of services, a key theme in some of the essays here. This would also have relevance for the conflation, not always very helpful, that is made between the values of “impartiality” and “fairness” in some chapters. But these are matters of preference rather than substance.

The Handbook becomes even more than just the sum of its parts because of the consistent and clear line of argument set out by Hupe in the three introductory and two concluding chapters, as well as four chapters in the middle sections which to some extent serve as a Greek chorus reminding us of the overall thrust (Hupe co-authors two chapters with Michael Hill and one with Lael R Keiser). They push for clarity in focusing on the questions to be asked about SLB, conceptualise both the dimensions of bureaucrat service provision as well as the range of factors and constraints beyond the immediate bureaucrat-client interaction that shape the type of service provided. The purpose of such a framework is only partially exhortatory, inviting others to use the framework, more realistically it serves as a map on which scholars can locate their own work and relate it to others. Hupe and his co-authors are concerned with the question of how the factors shaping SLB performance of tasks can be theorised in a way that al-

lows for generalisation and the accumulation of research knowledge. It is this mapping out a future, as well as documenting and evaluating the past and present, that makes this book a landmark in the field of street-level bureaucracy.

References

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